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Madonna Manor rocked by new wave of sex suits

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By Bruce Nolan
Staff writer

Eight more men who lived as children at Madonna Manor in the 1950s and 1960s have filed a new wave of lawsuits charging they were beaten and occasionally sexually molested at the Catholic institution.

The charges raise the total to 14 men who have filed public accusations of brutality or sexual molestation at the hands of nuns, priests, brothers and civilian staff at the Marrero facility. The home sheltered children from troubled or impoverished families as part of the charitable arm of the Catholic church.

The latest lawsuits were filed in four weeks in January and February. Six lawsuits were filed shortly before Hurricane Katrina.

The concentration of complaints against Madonna Manor is far higher than anything the Archdiocese of New Orleans has seen with regard to any other single institution or person in its experience with allegations of child sexual abuse.

Archdiocesan spokesman the Rev. William Maestri said the archdiocese is looking into the latest allegations.

"We take these seriously," he said. "Once again the archdiocese is in a position of delicate

balance, between being responsive to the allegations with all the seriousness they deserve, while at the same time wanting to be ever mindful of the reputations of those who are named in the allegations."

Records are sparse

After the first wave of lawsuits, Maestri said researching the charges was proving difficult. He said the relevant records were four decades old, and in many cases seemed comparatively sparse by contemporary standards. In addition, he said, the details behind some allegations were so scant they were hard to research.

However, flooding by Hurricane Katrina seems not to have damaged those archives and should not further complicate the research, he said.

All the suits name a single defendant, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the successor to the archdiocesan agency that ran Madonna Manor at the time the alleged events occurred.

Several plaintiffs name priests, nuns or civilian employees whose names are not in the institution's records, Maestri said.

All the plaintiffs in the new lawsuits allege that they had no clear memories of the abuse until other former residents began to air similar allegations last summer.

The new plaintiffs are Richard J. Anderson, 58, of Bridge City; Louis Cantero, 53, of New Orleans; Anthony Dixon, 54, of Pearlington; Nolan Franz, 46, of Gulfport; Karl Lamprecht, 48, of Mandeville; Raymond McDonald, 51, of New Orleans; Albert Miller, 48, of Pearl River; and Richard Paul Pete, 49, of Kenner. All the men said they were sent to Madonna Manor as children.

Harsh environment

Collectively, their lawsuits describe a harsh psychological and physical environment in which children were sometimes told they were unloved, sometimes severely beaten, and sometimes sexually abused.

Pete, who said he arrived at the institution at age 11, said one nun, Sister Mary Omer, once split his scalp with a flashlight.

Several plaintiffs described a common childhood humiliation of having nuns closely inspect them as they emerged naked from showers.

In addition, all the plaintiffs said they were sexually molested by nuns, priests, or civilian staff workers, sometimes named in the suits.

In many cases they described specific incidents of abuse but said they did not know the names of their abusers. Attorney Roger Stetter, who filed all the suits, said the plaintiffs hoped to identify them as the plaintiffs collected records in the litigation process.

Nuns, monsignor named

At the time of the allegations, Madonna Manor was staffed by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Nuns named in the latest suits are Sister Mary Omer; Sister Gertrude Marie, Sister Alvin Marie, Sister Martin Marie and Sister Laurdette. After the first wave of litigation, Maestri said officials in the order informed him that those named were either dead, aged and incompetent, or had left

the order and could not be located. He did not assign names to those categories.

In the new suits, Miller, now a New Orleans police officer, alleges he was repeatedly raped by Monsignor Raymond Hebert, who served as chief executive for the agency that ran Madonna Manor. Hebert, who was accused in two earlier suits, retired several years ago as one of the most respected priests in the archdiocese. He retired as director of the department of clergy.

Maestri said earlier that the archdiocese believes Hebert is the victim of a misidentification. He said Hebert denies the allegation, as he has denied the earlier charges.

"I've never abused a child in my life," Hebert said of the earlier accusations.

The earlier accusations were taken before an archdiocesan review board. It found insufficient evidence to remove Hebert from ministry.

The plaintiffs charged that several unidentified priests and others abused them.

In some cases the plaintiffs named specific people as abusers at Madonna Manor or elsewhere, even though church records do not link those persons to the sites, Maestri said.

In addition, the plaintiffs charged that several civilian staff members molested them in various ways. Citing privacy concerns, Maestri declined to confirm civilian employment at Madonna Manor. Many of the staff members have common surnames that make them difficult to trace after more than 40 years.

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